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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000495

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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2019

TAGS: PREF PREL PTER KPAL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNRWA DIRECTOR SAYS NAHR AL-BARID
RECONSTRUCTION MUST BEGIN NOW

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a April 29 meeting with the Ambassador, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Lebanon Director, Salvatore Lombardo, said he was worried about ongoing delays on the GOL side regarding reconstruction efforts for the destroyed Palestinian refugee camp, Nahr al-Barid. Particularly, he noted that the delays are causing the Palestinian refugee community to become more hostile and angry towards UNRWA and the GOL. Lombardo noted that things could get "real nasty" if construction did not begin soon.

¶2. (C) The Cabinet has yet to approve the UNRWA-developed "Master Plan" for Nahr al-Barid reconstruction, but is set to discuss the matter on April 30. The expropriation decree and construction permits remain unresolved issues, in addition to a recently discovered archaeological site on the site of the camp to be reconstructed, which is also delaying progress. However, Lombardo noted that Saudi Arabia will make an initial contribution of \$25 million on May 5 to the Reconstruction Appeal. End Summary.

UNREST IN THE CAMPS

¶3. (C) In a April 29 meeting with the Ambassador and Poloff, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Lebanon Director, Salvatore Lombardo, said he was worried about ongoing delays on the GOL side regarding reconstruction efforts for the destroyed Palestinian refugee camp, Nahr al-Barid. He noted that the delays are making camp residents, and the Palestinian refugee community, in general, hostile and angry towards UNRWA and the GOL. At least 2,000 Nahr al-Barid residents demonstrated on April 24 to voice their growing concerns over the delays in the reconstruction of the camp. Earlier that day, Friday sermons hinted that if legal hurdles were not overcome before the June 7 Lebanese parliamentary elections, the

reconstruction would be less likely to take place, he reported.

ONGOING DELAYS
HOLDING UP CONSTRUCTION

¶4. (C) One delay in particular is that the Cabinet has yet to approve the UNRWA-developed design layout, or "Master Plan," for Nahr al-Barid reconstruction. The cabinet is set to vote on the Master Plan later today, April 30. In addition to the GOL's approval of the Master Plan, the cabinet must also approve the land expropriation decree. The cabinet has approved all amendments to the expropriation decree in previous sessions, but approval of the final document is set to occur on April 30 as well. Approval of these two items are prerequisites for reconstruction to begin.

¶5. (C) Occurring simultaneously throughout this entire process is the financing of the expropriated land. The GOL has the funding needed to begin initial construction. However, Minister of Finance Mohammed Chatah still needs to sign off on the transfer of funds order, from the Ministry of Finance to the Council of Development and Reconstruction (CDR). Lombardo asked the Ambassador to reach out to Chatah and ask him to sign the transfer of funds agreement immediately. Lombardo estimated that CDR can complete the expropriation process of the areas for the initial construction within one month after the receipt of funds from the Ministry of Finance.

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¶6. (C) After the Master Plan and expropriation decree are approved by the cabinet, the Ministry of Transport and Public Works' Urban Planning Directorate must decide whether or not to waive the construction permit requirement for UNRWA, so that UNRWA can begin actual construction. Lombardo wants the GOL to waive this requirement for UNRWA. However, GOL Chief Technical Advisor for Nahr al-Barid reconstruction Dr. Sateh Arnaout argued in a April 30 UNRWA donors' meeting that UNRWA will have to obtain the construction permits, as waiving this requirement would require parliament to amend the law. Once the GOL approves the Master Plan, UNRWA can begin to apply for construction permits to begin reconstruction. UNRWA's application will more than likely be handled in an expedited manner, Arnaout added.

HISTORY HOLDS UP CONSTRUCTION

¶7. (C) Another issue that has come up recently is the discovery of an archaeological site on the grounds of the Nahr al-Barid camp. Two, 3,000 year-old sarcophagi were discovered on the camp site. According to Lebanese law, the GOL is responsible for preserving the site. There exists a number of options on how to do this. However, UNRWA favors leaving the site as is and building around/above the archaeological find (known as back-filling), as it is the quickest and easiest option. Minister of Culture, Tammam Salam's recommendation on how to preserve the site is needed before construction can begin. Lombardo asked the Ambassador to speak with Salam to urge him to support this option.

SAUDI'S SET TO FINALLY PONY UP

¶8. (C) Lombardo also noted that Saudi Arabia has confirmed it will make an initial contribution of \$25 million on May 5 to the Reconstruction Appeal for Nahr al-Barid. Lombardo hoped that this initial downpayment from Saudi Arabia will trigger additional donations from the other Gulf countries.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) With the June 7 parliamentary elections looming and the GOL's attention shifting increasingly toward election-related matters, it is imperative the GOL signs off on the final details of the reconstruction plan immediately. There is real concern at UNRWA that if the GOL continues to delay voting on items such as the Master Plan and expropriation decree, the Palestinian residents in each of Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps will intensify their protests. These protests could turn violent in the lead-up to the elections, as many Palestinians already believe that any new Prime Minister or new government that takes office will be less supportive of Palestinian refugee issues than PM Siniora and the current government. This violence has the potential to spill out of the camps and into the general Lebanese public.

¶10. (C) The Saudi donation will be an encouraging sign. Hopefully, additional Gulf funding will start to come in, which may help ease some of the Palestinian refugee community's concerns. However, no amount of money will be as effective in alleviating their concerns and tensions, as will the actual sight of construction taking place will do. Therefore, we will enhance our efforts in urging the GOL to make its final approvals of the Nahr al-Barid reconstruction plan. End Comment.

SISON